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Solent Learning Community:

Utilising a community of practice approach to foster networks of pedagogic inquiry and enhance QL experiences across institutions.

By Sara Briscoe and Sean Wellington
ICED June 2010



■ OVERVIEW OF SOLENT COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE FEASIBILITY STUDY 2008-2009

- BACKGROUND
- METHODOLOGY
- KEY FINDINGS

■ SOLENT LEARNING COMMUNITY – LAUNCH YEAR REFLECTION 2009-2010

■ PROJECT TEAM



Why A Community of Pedagogic Practice?

- A Community of Practice (CoP) can be defined as:
 - “A set of relations among persons, activity, and the world; over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice”, (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p98)
 - “Groups of individuals who participate in a collection of activities, share knowledge and expertise, and function as an interdependent network over an extended period of time with the shared goal of furthering their ‘practice’ or doing their work better”, (Secundo et al, 2008, p91)
- A central principle is Legitimate Peripheral Participation - newcomers learn from ‘old timers’ by participating in limited tasks practiced in the community. Newcomers progress from peripheral to the community (apprentice) to full participation (master) (Lave & Wenger, 1991)
- CoPs are an “intrinsic condition for the existence of knowledge” with learning not simply situated in practice but as an integral part of practice that is “generative social practice in the lived in world”, (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Kimber et al, 2000; Swan & Shea, 2005)
- Members have a common purpose and language, shared background and experience. Through the CoP they can interact, communicate, learn from one another, solve problems and create new knowledge (Hildreth et al, 1998)

Why A Virtual Community of Pedagogic Practice?

- A virtual Community of Practice (vCoP) is “a network of individuals who share a domain of interest about which they communicate online”, (Gannon-Leary & Fontainha, 2007, p1)
- Technological advancement, the Internet and growth in ICTs has seen vCoPs growing in number and importance (Hildreth et al, 1998; Rogers, 2000; Stacey et al, 2004)
- Multi-faceted features of vCoPs:
 - Can overcome geographical boundaries
 - Can be quicker at building communities
 - Individuals can leave or join at any time without any consequences
 - They can develop without central governance (Milne and Callaghan (2006)
- Successful vCoP: relevant content and focus; leadership and management; technology provision; free-flowing nature; members willing to share and participate online, collaborate and trust (Pemberton et al, 2007; Gannon-Leary and Fontainha, 2007)
- But, rely on human interaction and relationships (Cockburn et al, 2001) that create challenges in a virtual environment –vCoPs unable to completely compensate for lack of face-to-face interaction, therefore physical elements are also required (Secundo et al, 2008)

SSU CoPP Feasibility Study: Aim & Objectives

Aim:

To identify the main issues that would influence the design, construct and development of a CoPP within SSU

Objectives:

1. To research current academic literature regarding pedagogic practice, learning networks and communities of practice
2. To research current approaches and leading practice within the wider academic community and relevant institutions with regard to pedagogic practice, learning networks and communities of practice
3. To evaluate the views of key internal stakeholders with regard to introducing a SSU CoPP
4. To examine the full potential of the SSU Intranet to provide an online space to support the SSU CoPP

SSU CoPP Feasibility Study: Methodology

1. Comprehensive literature review: Communities of Practice, learning networks, pedagogic practices and case study examples.
2. Research academic leading practice - visits to four HE institutions completed: qualitative, one-to-one interviews with academic managers, heads of departments and associate deans
3. Evaluating SSU's key stakeholders' views:
 - Qualitative, in-depth one-to-one interviews with key stakeholders responsible for advanced scholarships, staff development and learning and teaching.
 - Online quantitative survey to establish current and future pedagogic learning preferences and intentions of all academic and support staff. 155 completed surveys
4. Assessment of the potential of existing Intranet facilities to provide a secure, robust and user-friendly online learning environment



SSU CoPP Feasibility Study Research Findings

- Institutional backers and funding should be acquired before the CoPP's launch and introduction
- A clear strategy, tactics, timeline and goals should also be developed against which progress can be measured, monitored and controlled
- The CoPP should be embedded into institutional processes, practices and structures with promotion routes identified for staff as a tangible incentive to participate
- Administrative and technical support need to be provided with collaboration between IT, technical staff, students and academics being encouraged
- The physical aspects of the CoPP (e.g. workshops, forums and reading groups) should be developed and physical space should be provided, alongside the development of virtual tools (e.g. online discussion forums)

■ BENEFITS OF A CoP APPROACH

- Enhance T & L –student experience
- Foster generic research skills
- Tap into synergies
- Share best practice/ Expertise
- Improve academic profile
- Encourage links between faculties

■ CHALLENGES

- Difficulty & time involved in establishing a vibrant community of practice!
- Intellectual property issues
- Not all staff value T & L research
- Cultural shift needed
- Pulling together research from across the network
- Difficulty of finding enough funds
- Teaching loadings

■ TACTICS

- Encourage ownership in schools – identify 'champions' / leaders
- Research staff/ student/ institutional priorities and agendas and 'hook' into these
- Frame Community of Practice as a problem-solver for staff
- Identify small scale research projects to involve staff
- Consider rewards for involvement in the community
- Consider dissemination – publication strategy; e journal?, newsletter? Posters?
- Establish links with other institutions

■ CoPP – possibilities?

- Research workshops – fosters rigorous approach
- Seminars on aspects of pedagogic practice
- Writing residencies
- Working paper series
- Mentoring programme
- 'Speed dating'
- Interdisciplinary projects
- Reading groups
- Away days
- Online forums

Quantitative findings (1)

- Online survey of SSU staff 'interested in teaching or supporting student learning'
- Administered to staff in all four faculties and LIS, 8-26 June 2009
- 154 responses: 119 Academic Staff and 35 Support Staff
- Some respondents relatively new to higher education, and some with considerable experience (more than 15 years)
- Strong support for the formation of a learning and teaching network: respondents identified a wide range of knowledge and skills that they could personally contribute (e.g. mentoring, bid writing, writing for publication etc.)
- Respondents also identified the kinds of support they would find most helpful

Quantitative findings (2)

Current and future teaching and learning/research interests:

Academic Staff

- Your subject specific discipline
- Encouraging student participation in learning
- Activity based learning
- Student experience
- Student feedback

Support Staff

- Learning support
- Flexible learning
- Encouraging student participation in learning
- Independent learning
- Activity based learning

Quantitative findings (3)

Respondents would particularly welcome support with:

Academic Staff

- Finding research partners
- Establishing research teams / clusters
- Collaborative learning

Support Staff

- Poster / workshop presentations
- Finding research partners
- Collaborative learning

Quantitative findings (4)

- Preferred method of working:
 - Face-to-face meetings
 - Workshops
 - Seminars
 - Online
 - Preference for monthly activities, during working hours

Project Recommendations

- Develop a Community of Practice to support pedagogic practice and research at SSU
- Develop a clear strategy, tactics, timeline and goals. Measure and monitor progress
- Ensure adequate resources are committed to launch and maintain the network
- Use face-to-face events, supported by online technologies as appropriate
- Address topical issues and concerns of staff

SOLENT PEDAGOGIC RESEARCH NETWORK PROJECT 09-10

Initiate a CoP to support pedagogic research and share good pedagogic practice across the University (extending opportunities to partner institutions).

- A monthly series of lunchtime workshop sessions to address topical issues
- An online presence, with active discussion and debate
- The use of mentors to support staff inexperienced in pedagogic research
- A searchable database to allow staff to share their research interests & identify opportunities for collaboration
- A pedagogic research journal, initially with articles published online
- Opportunities for researchers to present work in progress and receive feedback on their work

SOLENT PEDAGOGIC RESEARCH NETWORK PROJECT 09-10 REFLECTION

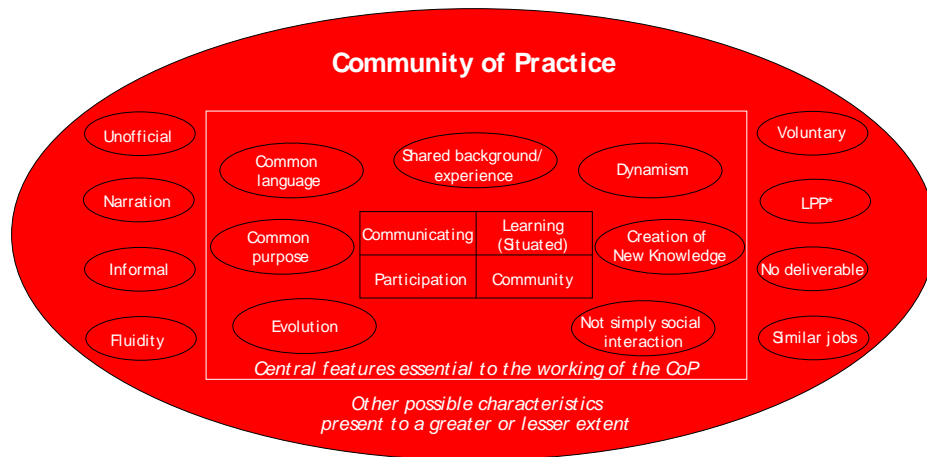
- LIMITED BUDGET
- CONTINUED ENTHUSIASM OF PROJECT TEAM
- BRANDING – SOLENT LEARNING COMMUNITY (SLC)
- THREE MAIN STRANDS
 - SLC Workshops
 - SLC Dialogue
 - SLC Connect
- ISSUES
 - Funding, support, space!
 - Conflict with other projects
 - Momentum
 - Awareness

■ QUESTIONS?

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Central and Peripheral Features of a Community of Practice



* LPP: Legitimate Peripheral Participation

Source: Adapted from Hildreth et al, 1998

PAUSE FOR THOUGHT 1

■ How is pedagogic inquiry supported within your Institution?

- Relationship to T & L and Research Strategies
- Who undertakes pedagogic inquiry?
- What sort of areas?
- Degree to which pedagogy shared/ disseminated
- Support for early career staff?

PAUSE FOR THOUGHT 2

- What value could a community of practice approach offer your Institution?
- Value to:
 - Students
 - Staff
 - The Institution
 - Other stakeholders
- Are there any potential disadvantages?

PAUSE FOR THOUGHT 3

- What form of CoPP could be applicable in your institution?
 - Alignment with your institutional mission/ goals?
 - Aims & objectives focussed or broad based?
 - vCoPP? Face to face, Physical space, combination?
 - What would be the constraints?

PAUSE FOR THOUGHT 4

- What issues and constraints would arise from the development of a CoPP/ vCoPP at your Institution?
 - Resources
 - Champions/ leadership
 - Resisters
 - Cultural issues
 - Practical issues

PAUSE FOR THOUGHT 5

- How would you encourage & support staff to engage with a Community of Pedagogic Practice within your Institution?
- How would you 'sell' the idea to senior management?
- How would you communicate the concept to staff?
 - Initially
 - Ongoing
- How could you support staff to engage in inquiry?